

## **Ready to Succeed Initiative Well Worth the Effort By Phil Power**

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They held the ninth annual Governor's Education Summit conference a couple of weeks ago in Lansing. It was the biggest one ever, with 1,000 people attending and 400 more turned away for lack of space.

But, not surprisingly, the summit didn't get much attention, and disappeared almost without a trace in the maw of the big-time media machine.

It was important, though, because it marked a significant change in direction for Michigan's policies on early childhood and education, a change driven by what brain scientists and doctors have come to understand about early child development.

It turns out that children learn most rapidly from a very, very early age—probably starting literally at birth. Much of infants' brain and personality development takes place by the time they get to age 5 or so, after which learning is slower and emotional health is more problematic.

What's very interesting about these findings is that they highlight an enormous disconnect in our society between what we know and what we do. What we know is that kids are best able to learn when they are very, very young. What we do is to start children in kindergarten at age 5, exactly the point at which their capacity to learn starts to slow down.

Consider, furthermore, the enormous misallocation of billions of dollars arising from this disconnect. For some years now, a group of heavyweights from the business, education, human services and foundation communities have been meeting to chew on this issue. Called "Ready to Succeed," this group has sponsored some interesting advertising campaigns on radio and TV, all around the theme of "Be a hero from age zero" and urging parents of newborns to "hold, talk, read, play," and so forth with their children. The idea is to get the practical consequences of scientific findings into the heads of ordinary parents.

The Ready to Succeed folks had a willing audience in Gov. Jennifer Granholm, who immediately latched on to the idea, now repackaged as "Project Great Start." At the education summit she announced a sweeping plan to use donations instead of tax dollars to promote the idea that "education begins at age zero." The slogan will be on grocery bags from Meijer, on public service announcements on TV, in church bulletins and in videos in doctors' waiting rooms. "We need to hit this from all directions if we are to create a movement, if we are to change people's minds about when education begins," Granholm said in her keynote speech.

All this promotion is well and good. But it doesn't cut to the concrete core of what needs to be done if we are to bring our child care and education system kicking and screaming into the 21st century. Turns out the best in the world at all this are the (gasp) French, who operate a system of maternal and childcare centers for every family with children as part of the national health system. The centers start with prenatal care for mothers and babies, continue with home visits after the baby is born and provide very early childhood education. The whole system is linked in a continuum of care from birth to grade school, and most experts say it's the very best part of the French education system.

The English have a similar system, called "Sure Start." Of course, we probably can't get to the French or English systems overnight, even assuming we would want to. They are very expensive and fit perfectly into the French/English culture of cradle-to-grave social services that cost taxpayers a ton. But it does represent a model that might usefully be adapted to American conditions.

Gov. Granholm offered a start in her speech at the summit when she said that 17 Michigan elementary schools on a federal list of 213 underperforming schools this fall will open Family Resource Centers with state social services workers on hand to help solve family problems. The idea of co-locating social services, public health, and early childhood care in elementary school buildings has been kicking around for years, especially in communities with deeply rooted social and economic problems.

So suppose you add a child care specialist and a teacher to the Family Resource Centers. And suppose you expanded the program to all 213 underperforming schools. And suppose further...you get the point.

The big problem with all summit conferences is to figure out "what's next" after the conference is over. Edging toward a serious early childcare and education system is the obvious "next step." It will take a lot of tugging and hauling on a whole lot of constituencies that are invested in the system as it now is, but it's well worth the effort. And it could be a defining objective for a very smart Governor with three school age children and a demonstrated interest in policy innovations in the field.

Phil Power is a member of the Executive Committee of the Ready to Succeed organization. He is also the Chairman of the Board of the company that owns this newspaper. He would be pleased to get your reactions to this column at [ppower@homecomm.net](mailto:ppower@homecomm.net).